

Flint leaned against the splintering door. She needed a minute.

Rain battered against her shoulders and back, soaking her to the bone, but after the brutal summer Taura had had, the icy pricks were almost a relief. Except on the raw, chaffed skin on her back where Master Garnet's whips had landed. Six whips for six coppers, the cost of the vase she had accidentally broken in a rush to deliver the dessert. She had taken the beating obediently. What else could she do? Bruised and battered was a slave's way of life.

At least home gave her a morsel of safety. At home, nobody hit her. Physically. Emotional lashes didn't hurt half as bad. Most days, she could take it. Most days, she only needed a few minutes to prepare. Today, though, she just couldn't bring herself to open the door. The day had been terrible enough without a living, breathing reminder of what her life could have been had her sister been a smidge less selfish.

Flint wanted to run as far away as her aching legs could carry her. To a place where she could be free. Or at least dead. So she would never have to worry about a thing.

Freedom! The word made her scoff. Freedom was a fantasy reserved for the shrewd. Humans like her got that stupid belt around her neck. The mark of a slave. If she somehow managed to run away, someone would recognise the runes on the belt and drag her back to her owners, but not before thrashing her within an inch of her life. And once caught, death was a mercy her owners would not grant. No, the best thing for a slave like her was to shut up and obey.

Every fibre of her muscles ached. Her shoes felt heavy, like someone had nailed her feet to the ground. But the rain washed away some of the stench of despair. Couldn't she just stay here? A deep grumble from her stomach answered. Sixteen hours since she had stuffed the edible parts of a mouldy loaf of bread down her throat.

*Well, no point in delaying the inevitable*, she thought to herself. She sighed, took a deep breath, and pushed the door open.

"I'm home!" She called out to the ghost of her past, dripping on the dry yet dirty floor.

"Grace?" The word hit her like a slap. It took all her will power to contain the tears that stung the corners of her eyes. *Even today you can't remember me, old man?*

"No, dad, just me, Flint."

"Oh!" He stared at her like he was trying to remember who she was. For a fleeting moment, Flint hoped. She stared at the sorry remains of the man who had crossed an ocean for her. Grey hair had become a mop over his head, and his greying beard hadn't fared much better. His shirt drowned out his skeletal body. Soot caked every inch of his wrinkled skin. Most of what he babbled sounded foreign to Flint's ears. "Darling, can you tell Shisha to get me a fresh pair of clothes? I am meeting a friend for dinner tonight."

“Dad, mom is dead. She died sixteen years ago. It’s me, Flint. Don’t you remember me?”

“Flint?” He twisted the name on his tongue, like the taste would jog his memories. For an instant, his eyes went clear and sharp. A smile bloomed. “Yes. My daughter. My daughter, whom I carried across the ocean wrapped in my Grace’s shawl. My daughter, whom I walked down the aisle. My daughter, who was everything pious and good and kind about me. Oh! My precious Grace!”

The smile and the tears were for her sister. The open arms and the love within was for her sister. But she wanted it. Desperately. She wanted to fall into his arms, to experience the love that belonged to a distant memory. Because she knew in her heart that she wouldn’t ever be loved like Grace was. Though she was the one who kept his back covered and his belly full, Nathan would never forget the girl who almost got them killed. And that stoked Flint’s anger into an inferno. She slapped his hands away.

“Grace is dead, dad.” She yelled. “She died like she lived, selfishly. We are poor because of her. My back is sore and my body is breaking because of her. Mom is dead because of her. I almost died because of her.” Tears streamed down her face, thick and hot. “I am the one who keeps you alive. I am the one who brings you food. Why won’t you love me like you loved her? Why won’t you move on? Why won’t you forget her?” Flint was on her knees, sobbing and kneading the skin over her ribs like it would stop the ache in her heart.

Her father had gone back to that lost state she hated so much. Moments of lucidity were becoming rarer and rarer. She understood that his mind was diseased, but that didn’t stop her from needing him. For one evening, she wished he would forget the past and give her the love she begged for every day. For one evening, she prayed they could live like they did before her father became trapped in his mind. She missed the man who had raised her, who would have done anything to make her smile, despite their unfortunate circumstances. She knew she was being irrational, but for one evening, she felt like she deserved it.

The stranger appeared out of thin air, like he often did, and knelt down in front of her. Flint froze. His eyes narrowed and his brows furrowed at the sight of her tears. His fingers reached out to wipe them away, but they never made it to her face.

Ignoring his presence, Flint stood up slowly and made her way to the makeshift kitchen. Despite the mountain of ache crushing her heart, she realised she was glad to see his familiar face. He had appeared and disappeared far too many times for her to fear any harm. She liked to pretend he came because he cared about her, but she knew it was wishful thinking.

“Happy birthday, Nina.”

Her body reacted on its own. Before she knew it, she was staring into the stranger’s big, black eyes. A half-grin was frozen on his thin lips. Flint had never taken the time to observe him, but now, frozen in time, she could see his high cheekbones and pointy nose, his tall yet

lean frame, his long braid of thick, black hair curling around his shoulder and ending just below his waist. She could see the blackish grey hue of his skin, like he was a human and an alien at the same time. She could puzzle over the feather hanging from his braid, the strange pendant hanging around his neck, his bizarre attire. But one thing puzzled her the most.

“How do you know that name?”

Nobody was supposed to know the name that could be the end of her. While the Taura usually took any chance to piss off the Warlocks, after what Grace did, hiding a Ravelin would be akin to declaring a war between the continents. And the Taura weren't strong enough to do that. So, best case, they would kill her and her father. Worst case, they would hand them over to the Warlocks, and that would be a fate worse than death.

The stranger took a step towards her, and that's when she noticed him holding a plate of something she didn't recognise.

“Your sister-”

“I don't have a sister. Never did.” The words slipped out before she could stop them, laced with so much venom they stung her tongue as they left her lips.

“Your anger is justified, Nina. But-”

“Stop calling me that.” Flint kept her voice low and even. Her father had a reputation for not being all there in the head, and she would be rotting in the soil before she let it be known as a family problem. It didn't take a genius to figure out that not everyone saw strangers appear out of thin air.

“Flint, then?” He raised a hand in surrender. “May I give you a birthday present?”

The words made her choke on her emotions. The mistrust was still there, but the care was softening its edges. Being thought of isn't in a slave's fate.

She mustered the tiniest nod. He tenderly placed the plate in her hands. It was warm, filled with tiny spirals of bright orange. The aroma that rose was heavenly, so complex that she lacked the vocabulary to untangle it.

For a while, silence expanded to fill the space as ~~Nina~~ Flint sorted through her thoughts. She decided to accept the gift. It was, after all, the first one she had ever received.

She carefully pinched a spiral piece between her thumb and index finger. It crumbled under the slightest pressure, and warm syrup oozed out. Carefully scooping a piece between her fingers, she placed it on her tongue. A symphony of sugar and spice exploded in her mouth, then a tinge of sourness melted into her taste buds. Her eyes closed as she savoured the bite. She couldn't remember the last time she had tasted something so divine.

Her eyes opened, and so did her hunger.

The stranger looked on with a warm smile as she downed one piece after another. She was so ecstatic, not even breathing could make her pause.

“What is this?” She asked, placing the last piece on her tongue.

“Your sister’s favourite sweet.”

Anger flared for an instant, but the syrup doused it before it could turn her thoughts to kindling.

Neither spoke another word until the last remnants of the syrup were licked off the plate. Flint purred with bliss. It had been years since she had enjoyed the pleasure of a full belly, let alone something so sweet.

“What?” She finally asked, only mildly irritated with the fool who looked at her the way she wished her father did.

“You remind me of her.”

Familiar anger simmered beneath her skin. “Don’t say that. She was a selfish woman. She destroyed my family. I have spent an entire lifetime trying to be the opposite of what she was. Don’t tell me I am like her. Don’t tell me my life’s work was pointless.”

“Look, I empathise with the difficult life you have lived, but she was hardly responsible for it.”

Flint scoffed. “Not only did she burn my life down, she also changed the fate of humanity for the worse. Have you been across the sea lately? People are risking their lives to cross over to Taura, knowing that only slavery and humiliation awaits them in these lands, because that is better than the purge happening in Rashtra. She did that. How can you tell me it wasn’t her fault?”

The stranger knelt down next to her, like all his strength had evaporated in a heartbeat. “I won’t downplay the results of her actions, but I will tell you this much: She wasn’t a bad person. She pushed herself beyond limits, trying to fulfil your brother’s dreams. Her advisors, mostly your grandfather, corrupted that dream into a living nightmare. If you need to hold on to anger, direct it at him, not your sister. Grace was a victim.”

“I had a brother?”

The stranger nodded. “Liam was Grace’s twin. They were inseparable, she told me. I never met him, but from the way she talked about him, I could infer that he had a huge impact on her life.”

“What happened to him?”

"He died when they were ten. Some sort of experiment gone wrong. I was there that day, collecting..." He paused, cleared his throat, then continued. "Grace was the only survivor. All her life, she mourned him. Your grandfather convinced her that the only way to give meaning to Liam's life would be to create an empire for humanity, and she..." Pain pulled his face tight, but he pushed on. "She gave her life to that cause."

"Why hasn't dad ever mentioned Liam?"

"It's... complicated. Nathan has never loved any of his blood the way he loved Grace. And having had the pleasure to know her, I can't fault him for it. There was nothing unlovable about her."

Flint stayed quiet. So many conflicting emotions bubbled under her skin she couldn't make sense of any of them. The way the stranger spoke about the object of her hatred had Flint reevaluating everything she thought she knew. But before she could upend everything she believed in, she needed to know one thing.

"What was she to you?" Her voice was so small, so soft, it betrayed her frustration. The stranger gasped as he looked her in the eye. His eyes begged her to ask something else, anything else, but she chose to press on. "You coming here from time to time to see how I am must mean she was special to you."

The stranger opened his mouth, but no words came out. He reached into his braid and removed a brooch in the shape of a feather. It was worn and tarnished and stained with blood, but Flint could tell it was expensive. The amount of food that brooch would get a Taura would free her from hunger for weeks. Yet, she knew silver was worthless in the hands of a human. Not only would no Taura trade with a slave, she would be punished for stealing from her masters. Regardless, her fingers wrapped around the brooch.

"Was it hers?"

The stranger nodded. "And now it is yours. Keep it. It belongs with a Ravelin. Grace would have wanted you to have it."

They sat in silence for a while. Flint stared at the silver brooch in her hands. She wanted to know so much about the family she knew nothing of. About the brother she didn't know she had. About the mother she vaguely remembered, but her father never spoke of. About the manor in Rashtra that should have belonged to her. She couldn't figure out where to begin.

By the time she came up with a question, the stranger was already jumping to his feet. His fingers wrapped around the pendant hanging from his neck, and thin tendrils of green mist began to pour out of the stone. Flint knew what followed.

"Wait!" She yelled, then immediately covered her mouth. She hoped nobody heard that.

"I must go, I'm afraid. But I will see you soon. Think of better questions in the meantime."

The stranger said, then chuckled like he knew a joke she didn't.

The green mist disappeared, leaving Flint alone, but probably for the first time in her life, not lonely.